

BRIEFING

Children and young people's consumption of energy drinks

Introduction

As part of our work on understanding the drivers of challenging behaviour, NASUWT has been exploring the issue of harms among pupils. Overconsumption and reliance on energy drinks has been a problem for many years, as reported by teachers, with the Union first becoming aware of it over a decade ago.

To gain an up-to-date picture on this issue, we asked teachers and school leaders in our 2025 Behaviour in Schools Survey whether they are concerned about the pupils they teach misusing substances and engaging in harmful activities. A total of 4,000 NASUWT members answered this part of the survey from the near 6,000 who participated in the research. As would be expected, most of those who skipped the question were those working in the primary sector.

This means the significant majority of those providing responses were those in secondary, post-16, or further education.

To understand the levels of misuse on a more granular level, teachers and leaders were asked to state whether the issue was occurring in school or out of school.

THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE

Looking at the data, issues of misusing certain substances or activities are more likely to happen outside of school. However, the issue is also clearly manifesting within the school as well, with some misuse more common than others.

Excessive consumption of energy drinks was the top concern for teachers and leaders, with 71% concerned about it inside of school, and 70% outside of school. This is the highest percentage of all of the harms identified, as set out in the table below.

The full findings are:

	Inside of school	Outside of school
Energy drinks	71%	70%
Cannabis	19%	57%
Alcohol	7%	55%
Nitrous oxide	4%	25%
Nicotine pouches/snus	13%	30%
Gambling websites or apps	6%	24%
Spice	9%	24%
Other drugs	5%	16%

These higher levels, when compared to other harms, may be due to their ease of availability and the lack of regulation around children and young people buying these drinks. This is despite the voluntary ban introduced by supermarkets in January 2018.

When broken down into education phases, of the 2,636 secondary teachers that answered, 85% worry about pupils misusing energy drinks in school and 70% out of school.

Of the 461 primary teachers that answered, 24% worry about pupils misusing energy drinks in school and 95% out of school. This is despite children at primary school being aged 11 and under.

One primary school teacher told us that in their school “children drink energy drinks arriving to school”, which is concerning from both a health and educational perspective.

THE PROBLEM WITH ENERGY DRINKS

- Energy drinks are stimulants, yet are readily available in most supermarkets, petrol stations and even your local corner shop.
- European legislation states that such drinks are not recommended for children. However, in the UK, such drinks are available to everyone, regardless of age.
- Energy drinks contain caffeine, a legal stimulant, which temporarily increases alertness, attention and energy, as well as elevating heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rates. This makes them different from other fizzy drinks often consumed by children, although both can contain high levels of sugar
- Caffeine is highly soluble and easily passes through the body’s membranes. Many people feel the effect of caffeine 15 minutes after ingestion. However, the peak of the caffeine blood concentration is reached within one to two hours.
- The amount of sugar in energy drinks is also a cause for concern. Common brands can contain approximately 25 to over 60 grams of sugar per serving. It is well evidenced that consuming high amounts of added sugar, like that found in energy drinks, is linked to negative health effects, including an increased risk of obesity, heart disease, and fatty liver disease.

HOW DO ENERGY DRINKS AFFECT BEHAVIOUR?

As a stimulant, energy drinks give those who consume them more energy. However, this can lead to a variety of different behaviours, including a lack of concentration and hyperactivity. Furthermore, as the caffeine wears off, it can lead to a 'crash', or a time of very low energy.

A study by Yale University found that students aged 11-14 who reported drinking energy drinks were 66% more likely to be at risk of hyperactivity and/or lack of concentration, which is linked with bad behaviour.

TEACHER VOICE ON BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES

To understand the impact that the use of these harmful substances and activities is having on behaviour, teachers were asked for comments on their experiences.

Common themes related to the use of energy drinks included fluctuations between hyperactivity and exhaustion, a lack of focus, irritability, mood swings and erratic behaviour. Teachers report more aggression by pupils who are clearly affected by these substances.

Specific comments include:

- "Energy drinks make it very difficult for students to focus and engage with learning and seems to make students noisier, and agitated."
- "Children under the age of 16 are served heavily caffeinated energy drinks and are not able to regulate in lesson."
- "Energy drinks are banned in school, supposedly, but some students bring them in their bags and drink them at break times. These drinks encourage even more lack of concentration and disruption from these students."
- "The students drinking energy drinks are very combative when the drink is 'fresh' in the system and extremely lethargic once the effects are gone."
- "Energy drinks [are a] massive issue. Parents allow them but pupil behaviour is up and down all the time. Can't focus, can't sit still, and just think it's cool to drink them."
- "Energy drinks make it difficult for students to regulate their behaviour."
- "The school has a 'no energy drink' policy, but that doesn't stop some of them. They are either hyper and overly loud and overbearing, or tired and listless."
- "Energy drinks make young people quite unpredictable and they often suffer with headaches."
- "Hyperactivity in consuming energy drinks. The packaging and marketing is appealing to children, and parents don't always understand that what they are allowing their children to drink is harmful to them."
- "Young children are bouncing off the walls in lesson time when they have walked to school drinking energy drinks."

POLICY ASKS

Addressing the issues of children and young people misusing alcohol, legal and illegal substances and other harms cannot be tackled by the education system alone. We are calling for partnership approaches to be established, involving schools, health services, police, youth justice services and other stakeholders to share expertise and resources effectively.

Given the links between substance misuse and mental health issues – both as a cause of engaging with harmful behaviours and a result of these risky activities – NASUWT is continuing with its call for the Government to commit to ensure every school across England has access to a school-based counsellor.

NASUWT would also urge the Government to implement its plans to ban drinks containing more than 150mg of caffeine per litre to under-16s, both in retail outlets and online. However, in recognition that children can still obtain these drinks from their parents or other adults, we continue to call for better public health campaigns to make adults more aware of the harms energy drinks may cause.

Linked to this, NASUWT is calling on the Department for Education to Include energy drinks on the statutory list of prohibited items in the *Searching, Screening and Confiscation Advice for Schools* document, should proposed legislation to age-restrict their sale be passed.

Current guidance leaves enforcement to individual schools via their behaviour policies, placing the full burden on staff to manage bans locally. If the Government deems energy drinks harmful enough to be age-restricted, it is unacceptable to leave schools without national backing to enforce a ban. This change would require an amendment to the Education Act, but the urgency and scale of the issue demand action.

About Us

NASUWT is The Teachers' Union and is the voice of the teaching profession.

Our aim is to improve and protect the status, morale and working conditions of the teaching profession so that teachers and headteachers can provide the best education and support to children and young people.

We are committed to ensuring that teachers and headteachers are recognised and rewarded as highly skilled professionals with working conditions that enable them to focus on their core role of leading teaching and learning.

NASUWT is proud to be led by teachers for teachers. Our democratic structures ensure that we are the voice of the profession and our decisions are rooted in the concerns of our members.

Our members are teachers and headteachers working in schools, early years settings and post-16 colleges.